

WHY I GIVE: Fern Malila

*By Tommy Flanagan
FFN Executive Director*

Hardworking. Passionate. Generous. This is how people would likely describe the character of Fern Malila.

Fern is deeply familiar with Saving Finland in America. Her Finnish roots, in Finland and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, are extensive. With three of her grandparents from Finland and another born to Finnish immigrants, Fern embodies the Finnish-American tradition of the U.P.

Although she has never lived in Finland, when she visited for the first time with her aunt, in 1977, it was almost as if she already knew the place. Since then, she has returned nearly 20 times to her family's origins south of Oulu, in the small town of Maliskylä (hence her name Malila).

Born and raised in Mass City, Michigan, Fern has had a fascinating global career. Trained as a nurse, she spent nearly 22 years traveling the world as a nurse consultant. She was based in the Washington, D.C., area but never felt fully settled there, as she traveled nearly 80% of the time, to Asia, Europe and Australia.

Coming from rural roots,

Fern truly created a unique professional path for herself.

Growing up in a heavily Finnish community, Fern remembers church services were in Finnish, and her parents spoke the language. Although time has faded some traditions, others are engrained in the people and the place, such as certain words widely used, including nisu (or pulla, the cardamom bread) and mojakka (soup or stew).

But it is more than words. I asked Fern what role her "Finnishness" has played in her life. She paused and replied, "What I got from the Finn side of my family, which is also a U.P. thing, is work ethic." She half-jokingly commented that when companies in the Lower Peninsula wanted a job done, they hired people from the U.P., because they knew how to work. One must wonder how the unique Finnishness of the region contributed to that trait.

The announcement of the closure of Finlandia University hit the community hard. It struck Fern, too. Although she had not attended Suomi College/Finlandia, she had family who had served on the board throughout the years, and she had served on the Finnish American

Council. The university was a physical and institutional guardian of the Finnish heritage of the region.

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Fern noted that keeping the “Finnish” part of the university through the years had been difficult, but what was there was unique – the connection to language learning, research, culture and exposure. A modern connection.

“We lost a piece of our Finnishness with its closure,” Fern remarked pensively about the fate of the more than century-old institution. “It made me realize that I need to do more. Sometimes almost losing something makes you realize how valuable it is.”

Fern is right. Finlandia University ceases to exist, however, all is not lost. Through Saving Finland in America, the legacy lives on. FFN’s project to preserve the Finnish American Heritage Center, Finnish-

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American Folk School, Finlandia Art Gallery, North Wind Books, Price of Freedom Museum, and *The Finnish American Reporter* comprise the only remaining piece of the last institution of higher education in the United States founded by Finns.

“The fact that the FAHC is still here is central,” said Fern. “This keeps it alive, local and tangible. It shows that we are still here. Just the idea that so much would have been lost if the collection had been dispersed... What we have here is a destination. People come to the FAHC expecting to find something, to discover, to learn.”

Life-long learning is one of Fern’s values. To someone just starting out on their own journey, she’d advise, “Always look for what you can learn from something. You can learn from an experience, a food, a place, a person. Don’t just go and look and see. Learn from it.”

This is how Fern understands saving Finnish-American history. It is a chance for us all to learn—about ourselves and others, and to understand the complexities of American history. She added, “It is a place where history will be cared for. We are not simply ‘housing’ these items — we are the caretakers of these artifacts.”

Fern never planned to be back in Ontonagon, where she now lives in retirement. When she returned to

the area on the Lake Superior shore, she realized the sense of community she had missed, and assured me with a laugh, “If you don’t have to be anywhere, winter isn’t really that bad!” Fern continues to be involved in many community activities, volunteering her time in a way that sounds like a full-time job.

She had one more message to share, a simple truth. “No money, no mission! If you don’t have any resources to follow through on your mission, you cannot improve. You can maintain, but even that gets challenging. No matter how large or small the gift, it makes a difference. It all comes together to contribute to a common mission.”

This is why Fern has given to Saving Finland in America. After 70 years, Finlandia Foundation’s mission has never called more loudly. Together, we can achieve a common mission to save Finland in America. It will take all of us contributing in whatever way we can.

Kiitos, Fern, for your contribution and for your words of inspiration.

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